

Statement of Rep. Mel Watt  
FCC Localism Task Force Field Hearing  
Charlotte, North Carolina  
October 22, 2003

RM-10803

I appreciate the opportunity to address the FCC Localism Task Force today and want to personally thank Chairman Powell and the other Commissioners for providing this important opportunity for residents of my congressional district and others in the surrounding area to express their feelings about the importance of localism in broadcasting.

I am mindful that the Commissioners and the FCC probably think that they get more than they need of my thoughts on these issues in Washington and that the purpose of this hearing is to get the input of the people, not their representatives in Congress. Consequently, my comments will be brief and based in large part on input that I have received from calls, letters and emails from my constituents.

Before proceeding to my substantive comments, I'd like to digress to make two brief points that are probably unnecessary because they are so obvious. I do so only because I think we should not take them for granted.

- First, isn't it great to live in a country that places a value on having a discussion such as this which, first and foremost, assumes an unequivocal commitment to the importance of the First Amendment and to the importance of the rights the First Amendment protects – free speech and a free and open press. What would many people around the world give to have an opportunity such as this to express themselves?
- Second, while tonight's discussion is about localism in broadcasting and you're likely to hear over and over that localism is important, I think it is also important to emphasize that every element of our system of broadcasting plays a valuable role, whether local, regional, national, print, television, radio or tech. In short, "the best citizen is an informed citizen."

I hope I can be equally as short in making my substantive comments. The bottom line is that localism in broadcasting is extremely important. That

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became very obvious from an unexpected source recently, the President of the United States. President Bush complained about how he perceived that the national media was “filtering” good information about the way things are going in Iraq and indicated that he was turning to local broadcasters to get the “real” story out. If all our media had been “national” media, that option clearly would not have been available to the President. This example clearly illustrates the value of differing perspectives in the media.

I suspect you’re going to hear a parade of people today who agree with the President that localism is important. I’ll also be surprised if you don’t also hear that the current local/national breakdown seems to be working real well in this community. Which leads me to the first point I want to make – if the system wasn’t broke, what was the FCC thinking recently when it decided to try to fix it? Already today, ten companies control the huge majority of media – radio, television, books, magazines, cable, internet, movies and music. One could make a good case that localism was about the only thing that was keeping some semblance of balance in the system. So why would the FCC want to make a bad situation worse by running the risk of reducing that important local ingredient?

In short, there seems to me to be no justification for the FCC’s June 2 decision to allow one company in our largest cities to own up to three TV stations, the daily newspaper, eight radio stations, the cable system and the internet sites affiliated with all of these. If the decision stands, I believe fewer and fewer large corporations will control more and more of our media and I believe we could expect lower standards, less attention to local interests and talent and a dramatic decline in the diversity of the public voices we hear, see and read. I think this would be bad for our democracy. That is why I have been a part of ongoing efforts in Congress to reverse the 3-2 decision of the FCC.

Constituents and groups from every conceivable political and philosophical perspective have joined in opposition to this proposal – from the National Rifle Association, to the National Organization for Women, the National Council of Churches, the Consumers Union, the Parents Television Council and the Leadership Council on Civil Rights. I believe they have done so because they understand the impact that greater concentration in the media would have on our democracy

I want to make a second point quickly, but with no less passion. There are important elements to diversity in the media other than just the issue of whether local groups or national corporations own the bulk of our media outlets. One element that is extremely important to my constituents and to me is the lack of racial minorities in the media ownership. This issue was addressed eloquently by Commissioner Adelstein on July 22 in his speech delivered to the Minority Media & Telecommunications Council. I agree with Commissioner Adelstein that the FCC's new ownership rules would likely make "the situation for minorities and new entrants ... go from bad to worse."

Despite representing more than 29 percent of the U.S. population, minority broadcasters own only 4 percent of the nation's commercial radio stations—a decline of 14% since enactment of the Telecommunications Act of 1996—and 1.9 percent of the nation's commercial television stations. In a Report and Order released by the FCC on July 2, 2003 and published in the Federal Register on August 5, 2003, the FCC stated that "encouraging minority and female ownership historically has been an important Commission objective, and we affirm that goal here." Both because I think minority ownership is important and because I believe minority ownership best promotes a diversity of viewpoints, I simply want to encourage the FCC to take this objective seriously and make a real commitment to it. Enough said.

Thank you again for being here.